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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses voluntary schools in the former British colonies of Singapore, Malaysia, and Fiji, and the relevance of some aspects of voluntarism for government schooling in Australia. The first section presents the historical background to the voluntary principle by which schools are owned and operated by non-government agencies assisted by government grants-in-aid. Voluntarism had been an integral feature of British educational policy for several centuries, and it was exported to British territories. However, after the Second World War, British education policy in Southeast Asia was designed to expand and improve the quality of education in preparation for independence. In Malaysia, post-independence educational policy was directed toward unified multi-racial schooling designed to produce a national Malayan outlook. Singapore, in contrast, has a broader concept of a national school. Several languages are used as media of instruction and voluntary schools have retained a place in the school system. Fiji, on the other hand, retains the same voluntary system of schooling it inherited from the British in 1970 at the time of independence, partially due to the lack of government funds to promote a major development of state or public schools. The aspects of voluntarism in schooling that would be particularly relevant to the Australian situation are the promotion of a sense of individual identity in schools and the importance of freedom of choice by parents in the schooling of their children. (CG)

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GOVERNMENT OR NON-GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS:

A BRITISH COLONIAL LEGACY AND ITS AFTERMATH

by

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GOVERNMENT OR NON-GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS: A BRITISH COLONIAL LEGACY AND ITS AFTERMATH

CLIVE WHITEHEAD

At the time of independence, former British colonies inherited education systems based on the voluntary principle, i.e. most schools were owned and operated by non-government agencies assisted by government grants-in-aid. This paper examines the justification for the practice and the contrasting policies adopted towards voluntary schools since independence by the governments of Malaysia, Singapore and Fiji respectively. In conclusion, discussion focusses on the relevance of some aspects of voluntarism for government schooling in Australia. Particular emphasis is placed on the need for more variety in government schooling and greater parental choice.

Voluntarism, which Arthur Mayhew once referred to as a fundamental feature of English education policy at all times and in all places,¹ and which was perhaps the most visible aspect of the educational legacy bequeathed by Britain to its former colonial dependencies, was justified on grounds of both principle and expediency. The establishment and maintenance of schools by means of private initiative was said to ensure a variety of aims and methods and avoidance of the official standardization and rigid uniformity traditionally associated with state education in France and Germany. Government education officials were expected to retain overall responsibility for the general direction of education policy, the provision of facilities and the maintenance of acceptable moral and academic standards, but they were also expected to encourage experimentation, to allow freedom of curriculum, to offer advice and to welcome it in return. Above all, meticulous inspection and control of details were to be avoided.

This essentially *laissez-faire* approach suited the conditions which prevailed in many colonies at the turn of the century. In most cases the Christian missions had started schools long before the British Government

formally established its presence and for many years thereafter, government officials were only too glad to leave the provision of schooling in private hands while they grappled with the problems of establishing law and order and a viable economy. Voluntaryism also enabled colonial governments to eke out the meagre financial resources available for education through systems of grants-in-aid paid to schools conforming to stipulated requirements for buildings and staff. Christian missions were also able to invoke the assistance of The Almighty when raising funds for schooling, an option that was not open to colonial administrators. Voluntaryism had a tradition going back many centuries in British education and it was only to be expected that it would be exported to British territories abroad. Indeed, it was only in the latter half of the nineteenth century that government or state schools were established in the United Kingdom and then only because of the inability of the voluntary agencies to cope with the task of providing universal primary education.² Within the colonies, Christian missions were prominent in providing a wide variety of schools but many other religious and ethnic groups also took advantage of the freedom to establish schools and to qualify for government grants-in-aid.

Private enterprise clearly laid the basis for education in most colonies but it had its drawbacks. It tended to encourage racial segregation and sectional rivalries in society and the quality of school management often left much to be desired. Grants-in-aid also tended to favour those organisations with the necessary financial resource to satisfy government standards with the result that government aid appeared to be based on the maxim of 'to him that hath shall be given'. Sectarian rivalry also led to the frequent duplication of schools in some areas and a paucity of provision elsewhere. In many territories voluntaryism also gave rise to separate and distinct school systems catering for different ethnic groups. This was especially noticeable in colonies like Malaya and the east African territories where 'plural

societies'³ existed in which several races lived alongside each other without fraternizing socially.

The extent to which British colonial governments directed education policy during the inter-war years was closely related to financial considerations. For example, in the 1920s the Gold Coast enjoyed a financial bonanza from cocoa exports which enabled the Governor, Sir Gordon Guggisberg, to initiate a policy of educational expansion which included the founding of Achimota College, but the impetus was short-lived.⁴ In most areas of the colonial empire, administrators had neither the funds nor the personnel to provide anything more than a general overview of developments and even that was often difficult to perceive in the depression-ridden years of the 1930s.

Many post-war critics have mistakenly argued that voluntarism was part of a 'divide and rule' strategy deliberately designed to stifle potential political opposition to British rule.⁵ The facts do not support this belief. Voluntarism had been an integral feature of British educational thought and practice for several centuries. It offered variety of schooling, scope for local initiative and protection for group or minority interests. Moreover, it was relatively cheap to administer and appeared to pose no threat to British sovereignty. In short, it was a classic example of the pragmatism which featured so prominently in British colonial rule.

Voluntary agencies were responsible for most of the schooling provided in Malaya, Singapore and Fiji during the colonial period. However, such was the infinite variety of practice so often found in British colonies, that in the case of the Malays, the British established and maintained a system of vernacular schools as part of their original treaty obligations with the Malay States. Prior to independence in the mid 1950s, there were, effectively, four school systems operating in Malaya and Singapore, each based on a different medium of instruction. These included the Malay vernacular schools, English-medium schools, which were open to all who could afford to pay the fees, and

schools catering for the Indians and the Chinese respectively. The Indian schools used Tamil as the language of instruction and provided for the descendents of Indian indentured labourers imported by the British to build roads and railways and work the rubber plantations. The Chinese schools, long regarded with suspicion by the British for political reasons, were closely aligned with the schools of mainland China. They taught in the medium of Kuo Yu (Mandarin) and adhered to the Chinese school structure, curriculum and textbooks. Many of their teachers were also recruited directly from China. In Fiji, Christian missionaries initially established a network of vernacular schools in the Fijian villages which were handed over to local Fijian management committees in the 1930s. Schooling for the Indians, whose presence in Fiji stemmed from the need for indentured labour to work the sugar plantations, was slower to develop and was provided almost exclusively by the Indian people themselves. Apart from the Malay vernacular schools, the governments in each of the three territories mentioned, were directly responsible for no more than a handful of schools. Their primary function was to supervise the general development of education and to administer the grant-in-aid arrangements.

The Second World War transformed the politics of Southeast Asia. British hegemony was shattered by the fall of Singapore in 1942, and even though Malaya and Singapore were reoccupied in 1945, Britain's days as a colonial power in the region were clearly numbered. Immediately after the war British education policy in the region entered a new phase designed both to expand and to improve the quality of schooling in preparation for independence. The emergence of Malay nationalism and the protracted struggle with the communists in Malaya were also factors of central importance in understanding education policy both before and after independence. In the dying stages of British rule in Malaya, education policy was reshaped to facilitate the belated growth of a sense of national consciousness. The Government gave financial backing

to national and national-type schools based on the use of Malay and English as the languages of instruction and this policy was pursued with renewed vigour after independence. The overriding objective of the independent Malayan Government was to produce a *national Malayan outlook*. This was to be achieved by multi-racial schooling, the progressive use of Malay as the principal medium of instruction, a common curriculum, and a unified school system in which the majority of schools would be owned and operated by the state. Voluntary schools were given the choice of becoming fully private or fully assisted government schools. Most chose to become the latter so that the present Malaysian school system is to all intents and purposes government owned and controlled. No fees are charged in government or fully-assisted schools and there is a high degree of state supervision and control of the schools in marked contrast to the colonial era. This policy, made possible by the relative economic prosperity of Malaysia since independence, has understandably met with opposition from the Malay Chinese but they have had little choice but to accept it or emigrate.

Since 1945, Malaysian education policy has been strongly influenced by Malay fears that their culture and the control of their homeland was threatened by the presence of a large Chinese minority which has traditionally wielded considerable economic influence. By contrast, the Chinese in Singapore, who constitute in excess of 70 per cent of the population, feel no threat from the Malay and Indian minorities. This fact is reflected in the education system which places a very high priority on the promotion of a Singaporean identity amongst the diverse ethnic groups resident in the Republic. Prior to independence, the British initiated a major expansion of government schools in Singapore in collaboration with voluntary effort. Since independence the *duality* has been maintained. Many schools have also been integrated, i.e. they now cater for two or more language streams. The education system is unified in the sense that all schools follow a common

programme and all teachers are trained by the state, but the concept of a national school is more broadly conceived of than in neighbouring Malaysia. For example, several languages are used as media of instruction in the schools although for commercial reasons a heavy premium is now placed on a knowledge of English at all levels of schooling. Voluntary schools have also retained a recognised place in the school system although they are expected to conform closely to the standards in government schools. The degree of control exercised over the voluntary schools depends on the amount of aid received. The main differences between government and government-aided schools lie in the areas of finance, responsibility for day-to-day management, and the status of staff employed. Education figures prominently in Singapore's national development but the school system has not been nationalised to the same degree as in Malaysia.

Fiji, by contrast, retains the same voluntary system of schooling inherited from the British at the time of independence in 1970. The government has been anxious to use education to promote economic and social development but it has not had the financial resources to promote a major expansion of schooling based on a network of state or public schools. Indeed, it has consistently upheld the virtues of voluntary effort in the establishment and maintenance of schools, assisted by generous government financial aid which currently accounts for approximately 18 per cent of total government expenditure.⁶ In the past there have been suggestions that the government should establish a network of public schools but they have been rejected in favour of a system which, whatever its shortcomings, is claimed to sustain local interest and support for schools. If the government assumed total responsibility for schooling it is feared that local support would rapidly diminish.⁷ Fiji is situated far from the political turmoil that has beset Southeast Asia since 1945 and this partly accounts for the marked lack of enthusiasm to use the schools, as in Malaysia and Singapore, as deliberate

agents of nation-building. A fuller explanation involves an understanding of the internal politics of Fiji and in particular, the complex balance of Fijian and Indian interests.

The following recent statement is indicative of the importance attached to education by the governments of most of Britain's former colonies:

Education in Nigeria is no more a private enterprise, but a huge Government venture that has witnessed a progressive evolution of Government's complete and dynamic intervention and active participation. The Federal Government of Nigeria has adopted education as an instrument par excellence for effecting national development.⁸

Nowadays, it is widely assumed, mainly on grounds of equity and efficiency, that a system of state schools provides a better national investment than a network of schools operated on the voluntary principle. At the heart of the matter it is a question of *control*. As the Indian Education Commission concluded in its report of 1966;

The growing educational needs of a modernizing society can only be met by the State and it would be a mistake to show any over-dependence on private enterprise which is basically uncertain.⁹

The political importance attached to the control of education has clearly determined the fate of the voluntary schools in Malaysia and to some extent in Singapore but voluntarism still has certain virtues that should not be discarded lightly. Government systems of schooling may facilitate equality of opportunity and uniformity of standards. Indeed, one leading Fijian academic recently suggested to the writer that a state system of schooling in Fiji could establish a much-needed basic standard of quality which could serve as a yardstick for all schools and also encourage a more meaningful expression of multi-racialism.¹⁰ But government school systems can equally generate sterile uniformity and rigidity which makes a mockery of education conceived of as a process of individual development and enrichment.

In many countries, including Australia, there is a pressing need to marry the advantages of both private and public enterprise in education.

Educational administrators need to provide for greater colour and variety while at the same time satisfying the criteria of equity, efficiency and public accountability. In particular, greater efforts need to be made to offer a wider range of choice of schools and types of schooling for parents who cannot afford to pay for the privilege of sending their children to private schools. Schooling in colonial Malaya or Fiji may have often been of poor quality, unevenly distributed and socially divisive but it rarely lacked colour and variety or local interest and support. The same cannot always be said of government schools whether in Australia or elsewhere. An emphasis on individuality and an innate suspicion of central planning and control have long been associated with British educational thought and practice. They may not readily accommodate to the modern image of education as a vehicle for national development but schools are surely poorer places if such emphases are cast aside in the quest for efficiency.

The quality of schooling in any education system inevitably reflects the calibre of educational leadership and administration. For more than a decade there has been frequent reference to the need for educational administrators in Australia to be more sensitive to local needs and aspirations. The challenge is not simply to make it easier for voluntary agencies to establish and maintain alternative schools but to enable government education systems to respond to the demand for greater choice. In Western Australia commendable efforts were made in the 1950s to reshape government secondary schooling on the comprehensive model. Unfortunately, the policy left little room for diversity. Perth Modern School lost its former unique identity as a highly academic institution with a restricted basis of entry and all government secondary schools have subsequently been developed as co-educational, neighbourhood comprehensives. Nowadays, unless parents have the financial means to opt out of the government education system altogether, they have no choice but to send their children to the local neighbourhood school. Local

zoning or defined catchment areas for government secondary schools have further restricted parental choice of schooling. There seems little doubt that these are contributing factors to the drift, some might say the rush, to non-government schools evident in recent years. Given the option, it is highly likely that the public would support a greater variety of government schools. Single sex schools, especially for girls, and schools of varying size are two variables that many parents might wish to consider in their choice of schools. Some schools, more especially at the secondary level, might also wish to emphasize certain subjects or groups of subjects, e.g. mathematics and science or music and fine arts. It is true that this idea was introduced into Western Australian government secondary schools in the 1960s but it was only on a limited scale and didn't result in any fundamental change in the nature of the schools involved. Schools might also wish to offer alternative types of curricular to that traditionally provided, including superior opportunities to develop skills in specified sports akin to that provided by the Institute of Sport in Canberra. Still other schools might wish to concentrate solely on lower or upper secondary school work or put special emphasis on catering for the needs of children with a variety of learning disabilities. Relaxation of zoning restrictions, which in many instances are now no longer so imperative because of falling school enrolments, would also broaden the basis of parental choice. Clearly a much greater element of choice in government schooling could be made available to the public if schools were administratively more autonomous. In the final analysis, however, it is the degree of freedom extended to Boards of Managers, Headmasters and their staff that determine the nature, tone and character of any school. Voluntaryism can encourage individuality and variety. The challenge currently facing administrators of government schools is to demonstrate that considerations of equity and efficient use of resources do not necessarily have to result in deadening uniformity at the expense of

variety. A useful starting point might be to examine more closely the virtues rather than the shortcomings of voluntaryism or private initiative in the provision of schooling.

The establishment of separate Boards of Governors for each government secondary school and participation in the selection of their staff, including the appointment of the headmaster/mistress, as occurs in New Zealand, might provide a useful starting point in the quest for more variety in government schooling in Australia. Greater freedom from blanket bureaucratic regulations and an element of genuine choice over annual expenditures would also enhance a sense of separate identity and help to generate public interest and concern within each school.

Regrettably, voluntary schools in both Australia and New Zealand have traditionally not been renowned for innovativeness and variety in the same way as many of their English counterparts, so they do not offer a ready example of what might be achieved if government schools were administered differently. Nevertheless, many of them do have governing structures which could speedily introduce changes if so desired. Government schools are not so fortunate. By contrast, they are hedged in on all sides by reams of bureaucratic regulations which largely inhibit any element of genuine choice over annual expenditures or choice of staff, which might, in turn, enhance a sense of separate identity and generate greater public interest and involvement.

Choice of secondary schooling inevitably involves personal and social values which are inseparable from the 'politics' of schooling whether in Australia or elsewhere. Many non-government schools in Australia enjoy widespread popularity because government schools fail to offer sufficient choice or, dare one mention it, selectivity. If there were several prestigious government schools in Perth comparable to Perth Modern in its heyday, preferably set amidst landscaped parklands, with perhaps Gothic-style architecture and ivy-clad walls, it is most unlikely that there would be

any significant drift to non-government schools other than for genuine religious reasons. Moreover, such schools need not cater exclusively for an academic elite as is commonly supposed. State governments have enormous resources at their disposal. The challenge is to utilise them more effectively than at present in the interests of all citizens. Local comprehensives may appear to satisfy the majority of the population but only, one suspects, because they have no option.

In all British colonies, whether they later became self-governing dominions like Australia and New Zealand or remained dependencies of Whitehall until after the second world war, education was entrusted initially to voluntary agencies. In Australasia voluntary schooling was subsequently superseded by government initiatives. There were various reasons for the change but inter-denominational rivalry, the uneven spread and quality of schooling, and the need for greater efficiency and accountability in the use of public revenue all figured prominently in the decisions to establish government systems of schooling. Similar arguments influenced countries like Malaysia and Singapore and many former African colonies to opt, after independence, for what are essentially government school systems. But once an efficient, stable and uniform system of schooling has been established for several decades, in which the principal needs of equity and accountability have been achieved, there is need for further consideration of how best to allow for a measure of diversity. Otherwise, a school system is in danger of falling prey to the deadening uniformity of method and purpose that Mayhew was so fearful of.

Educational administrators are not unaware of the problem in Australia. The Victorian Government, for example, is currently reported to be examining possible changes to school administration in an effort to promote a greater sense of individual identity in schools. Nevertheless, at the present time there is a sense of general unease being expressed about government schooling

throughout Australia and seemingly in New Zealand also. If this is to be arrested, more thought will need to be given, to ways of restoring a sense of genuine parental choice of schooling, and the options available will need to be meaningful alternatives. Both will call for a sense of adventure and an element of risk, two qualities noticeably absent in many high-ranking state education officials.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 A. Mayhew, *Education in the Colonial Empire*, Longmans, 1938, p.44.
- 2 Forster's Education Act 1870 was expressly designed to fill up the gaps left by voluntary initiative.
- 3 This term was popularized by J. S. Furnival in his study *Colonial Policy and Practice*, New York University Press, 1956.
- 4 R. E. Wraith, *Guggisberg*, London, 1967.
- 5 See for example, *Revised Report of the Royal Commission on the Teaching Services, West Malaysia*, Kuala Lumpur, 1971, p.24.
- 6 Figure supplied by Fiji Ministry of Education.
- 7 Minister for Education, *Fiji Parliamentary Debates*, 6 March 1978.
- 8 Federal Republic of Nigeria, *National Policy on Education*, Lagos, 1977.
- 9 *Report of the Education Commission 1964-66*, pp.446-7.
- 10 Registrar of the University of the South Pacific in conversation with the writer, August 1982.